

CONCLUSIONS

This report examines interstate variation in household food security. Using a multilevel framework, we have identified several contextual dimensions that appear linked to food security among households: the availability and accessibility of federal nutrition assistance programs, policies affecting economic well-being of low-income families (focusing here on tax policy), economic characteristics of communities, and social characteristics of communities. Together, these constitute key elements of what we term the food security infrastructure—a set of programs, policies, and community attributes that affect the availability, accessibility, and affordability of food and the extent to which resources are available to households to meet their food-related needs.

Overall, our findings lend strong support to the concept of a food security infrastructure that promotes household food security among community members. We find some evidence supporting a role for each of the dimensions, sometimes in affecting the overall risk of food insecurity and sometimes in moderating the detrimental impact of low household income. This framework is useful in understanding food insecurity, and has important implications for efforts to ameliorate food-related hardships. We document potentially important roles for the Food Stamp and summer meal programs in reducing the risk of food insecurity among families with children, suggesting that efforts to enhance the accessibility of these programs could be beneficial. Further, we demonstrate that policies outside of the nutrition area (here, tax policy) can either help or hinder families' ability to meet food-related needs. This suggests that efforts to increase food security would benefit from a broad focus on the range of policies that affect family economic well-being, rather than a narrow focus limited to nutrition assistance programs. We highlight the relationship between economic characteristics and household food security outcomes, thus confirming the importance of quality job opportunities as a component of the food security infrastructure. And we document a large and very robust link between median rent and food insecurity, which suggests that efforts to ensure affordable housing would be a vital part of efforts to increase food security. Finally, our findings with regard to a connection between residential stability in the community and reduced

prevalence of food insecurity suggest that social capital may play an important role. Furthermore, we find that most of the factors that are linked to food insecurity are also linked to hunger, a more extreme outcome.

Contrary to our expectations, we find no evidence that any of the state characteristics moderate the heightened risk of food insecurity associated with being poor. However, our results do suggest that families who are above the poverty line yet still economically vulnerable may be better able to maintain food security in the context of a more accessible Food Stamp program, a lower tax burden for households in the lower income ranges, and a stronger labor market. This pattern of results suggests that there may be a particularly vulnerable segment of the population, those who are in precarious financial circumstances yet who have not fallen into poverty, whose ability to meet food-related needs is most affected by the economic and policy context.

Readers should exercise caution in their interpretation of the apparent relationship between summer meals and food security. While we find statistically significant coefficients on both summer meal variables (state-level Summer Food Service program participation and state-level Summer School Lunch program participation), two aspects of our findings suggest caution. First, we find that state-level Summer School Lunch participation (though not Summer Food Service program participation) is also linked to lower odds of food insecurity among childless households, a result with no theoretical justification, suggesting that the former may be proxying for other unmeasured state attributes. Second, we find no evidence that summer meal programs have a greater impact on food security for poor, near-poor, or low-income households—those for which such programs are most relevant—than for higher income households. This differs from our findings for state-level Food Stamp participation and for the low-income tax burden, where the only significant relationships to food security are among near-poor and low-income households, a more theoretically consistent pattern. Further analysis of the relationship between summer meal programs and food insecurity is essential to understanding the potential benefits of such programs.

A second focus of our analysis was to determine the extent to which cross-state variation in food insecurity could be explained by the household and state characteristics in our model. We find that both types of variables are important in explaining cross-state variation, although their relative importance varies among states. Overall, it appears that the bulk of the interstate differences in food security can be explained by cross-state differences in both demographics and contextual characteristics.

These findings have important implications for our understanding of interstate variation in food security rates. In particular, our results illustrate that a high (or low) food insecurity rate can imply very different things in different states. In some states, it merely indicates that a state has a high-risk population (more poverty, more single-mother households, etc); in other states, it reflects unexpected food insecurity despite a lower-risk population. It would be valuable to provide estimates of “excess food insecurity” as a way of identifying states that fare better or worse than would be expected based on the characteristics of their residents. Efforts to strengthen the food security infrastructure may be particularly valuable in states that have unexpectedly high rates of food insecurity given the characteristics of their residents.